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The modern face of slavery

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MENDE NAZER was someone's property. Free now and in London where she was granted asylum after escaping six years ago, Nazer is speaking out, hoping to put an end to slavery.

Nazer's story reminds us that while religion has bolstered forms of enslavement down through the ages, it can also help us to blaze a path away from it. Her Muslim faith greatly helped her to survive her ordeal.

Raiders captured Nazer when she was a young girl in the Sudan and sold her into slavery in Khartoum. She was forced to work unlimited hours every day. She toiled when sick and suffered from sleep-deprivation. Her masters refused to use her name and addressed her instead by a curse word. They eventually sent her to work for another family in London, where she escaped in 2000.

Only weeks ago, Saudi Arabian princess Hana F. Al Jader, who lives near Boston, was accused of forcing two Indonesian women to be her domestic servants. And recent police raids uncovered brothels disguised as massage parlors, health spas, and acupuncture clinics in New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Maryland, and Washington, D.C. In those cases, the Associated Press reported, federal authorities arrested 31 people on human trafficking charges and freed more than 70 sex workers.

Rather than a modern aberration, slavery is deeply rooted in our history, including - shockingly - our religious history. If legal slavery had never before existed, we might be so outraged to discover virtual slavery today that we would take immediate steps to end it. In fact, Christians and Muslims tolerated massive slavery for many centuries. And these were not simply evil people perverting religion to their own ends.

The sacred texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all tolerate slavery. When 19th-century Christian slavery advocates argued that the Bible commands slaves to obey their masters in everything, they were right. In addition, both the early rabbis and the early Muslim jurists tolerated slavery and used categories derived from slavery in their marriage legislation, such as "acquisition" (in Judaism) and "ownership" or "control" (in Islam). These categories continue to shape religious law in both Judaism and Islam today. Religious toleration of slavery lent it moral credibility and contributed to its longevity as a legal institution.

Slavery corrupts the moral fabric of society. Unfortunately, the idea that one person could own another person's body did not die after the Emancipation Proclamation. It remains embedded in our national psyche and manifests itself insidiously in other forms, as well. Today in the workplace, incomes remain profoundly disparate, based on race and

gender. Outside the workplace, we have not overcome the idea that wives should obey their husbands, that parents own their children, or that sex can entail ownership and domination.

Harmful racial and sexual stereotypes infuse our popular culture, many of which can be traced back to slavery and which still have an impact on public policy. Women's access to reproductive health services varies by race and economic status, and African-American rape survivors face hurdles in the criminal justice system that white rape survivors do not.

The idea that one person may own another person's body is embedded in our moral thinking. This includes teachings about sexual morality that are found in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious texts. Sexuality without mutuality and consent is fertile ground for abuse. As in the time of slavery, this is still true. If we are to create a just and free society, we need to transform religious sexual ethics to make meaningful consent and mutuality central to our understanding and our practice.

Mende Nazer calls upon religious scholars to find a solution to the problem that sacred texts allow slavery.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims can complete the abolition of slavery by acknowledging past support of it, calling for reparations, and working vigorously to undo harmful racial and sexual stereotypes. We can create a world in which owning or controlling another person's body, whether as a worker or a wife, is impossible to imagine.

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